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## THE PURPOSE OF A GOOD BUSINESS DEPARTMENT IN A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL.

WHAT is a good business department? Why have one? What will it accomplish that is not being accomplished along the usual lines of high-school work? These and similar questions are being constantly asked by honest inquirers, and this paper is an attempt to answer these questions. I believe that much of the opposition to business education in secondary schools is based upon an insufficient knowledge of the meaning and purpose of such work.

I have no wish to enter into any controversy with those who believe that commercial departments are out of place in our high schools. Commercial departments are here, they are constantly increasing in number, and there is also a continual improvement in the quality of the work done. I believe they are here to stay, and it is for us to determine what we shall do with them. Neither do I wish to argue against the value of a college training. If a boy has the opportunity to go to college, and the ability to use a college education, I unhesitatingly advise him to go. There are, however, in every community, large numbers of boys who cannot, or will not, or should not go to college. Some of these are not in school at all, and many of them can be reached and helped and educated by a good commercial course.

My subject assumes that there are two kinds of business departments, good ones and poor ones. I shall not say much about the poor ones, but I shall try to give you my conception of a good one and of its purpose, and some suggestions as to how this purpose may be accomplished. Business education does not mean simply a course in bookkeeping and penmanship with a little commercial arithmetic. The popular idea has been borrowed from the private business schools with their short, technical, and incomplete courses, and too many have been

unable or unwilling to see that these might contain the germ of  
of something much better.

The commercial course in a public school should not be an attempt to compete with these private schools. The high school is first of all an educational institution, and the ideal business course should be no less liberal, no less educational, than the other high-school courses. It should no longer be possible to say that the commercial is the easiest course in the school ; all should be equally difficult. There is surely a marked difference between the short course of the business college, the purpose of which is to prepare pupils in the shortest time to be stenographers and bookkeepers, and the commercial course in an up-to-date high school, which includes work in English, mathematics, civics, economics, science, and language in addition to the technical commercial subjects, and the purpose of which is to train a boy to be of use in a business office, to help him to develop those mental and moral qualities which are essential to success in business, and at the same time fit him to be an intelligent and useful citizen.

There are three things which are essential to a good business department : first, good teachers ; second, a good course of study ; and third, a good equipment.

The most important factor in the success of a school or a department is the teaching force. Given good teachers, good results will follow, even though the equipment is not of the best. A distinguished professor is reported to have said :

These classical courses, though frequented by only a small proportion of the pupils, have always claimed a disproportionate share of the total expenditure made on the school, because for these courses the best teachers were required.

But why should this favoritism be shown ? If our school committees will select their commercial teachers with the same care which they exercise in their choice of other high-school teachers, they will do the one thing most essential to the success of their business courses. They must remember that a good teacher of science will not for that reason be a good teacher of mathematics, and a good teacher of either may prove to be a

poor teacher of the commercial branches. Neatness, accuracy, promptness, and obedience are of first importance in the work of a business department, and no teacher should be permitted in the department who does not recognize this. In selecting a teacher of science one looks for a man who not only has a knowledge of his subject gained from books, but who has in addition a practical knowledge gained in the laboratory or the field, and the director of the business department will be a better leader if he has had some training in the laboratory of business life.

One reason why the technical business subjects have not been given full credit for their educational value is that in many cases they have been poorly taught by incompetent teachers. If our work in high schools is to win the respect of both educators and business-men, we must teach these technical branches better than they have been taught before, and as well as our high schools teach other subjects. Even the typewriter requires something more than mechanical skill in order to obtain the best results. The machine puts a premium on neatness and accuracy, and when the teacher accepts only perfect work, the typewriter is a strong factor in the cultivation of the habit of doing all work neatly and accurately.

If you will pardon the personal element in the illustration, I shall refer to the work of my own school, in my attempt to give you my conception of a good course of study. At present, our commercial students are allowed to graduate at the end of the third year in school. This plan was adopted in the first place, because we wished to reach those pupils who were being attracted by the short courses of the private schools, and we were afraid that if we made the course too long, even if we attracted these pupils, we could not hold them up to the time of graduating. We have succeeded both in reaching and in holding these pupils, and we find now that there is a growing sentiment on their part in favor of a full four years for the course. At the present time over one-half of the pupils in the department are planning to elect enough additional work to give them a course of four years, and I am confident that in the near future our school committee can safely

make our course of study the same length as the other courses. This will make it possible for our pupils to cover the same subjects which we now include in the shorter course, and also afford an opportunity to carry at least one elective subject each year. Many of our pupils have wished to carry a science or a language, but there has not been opportunity for them to do so.

The proposed new course should contain substantially the following work :

Twenty hours of English.

Ten hours of history.

Ten hours of commercial law, commercial geography, civics, and economics.

Twenty-five hours of elective work, including mathematics, science, and language.

Twenty hours of the technical business subjects, bookkeeping, stenography, commercial arithmetic, business correspondence, and spelling.

Fifteen hours of unprepared work, including typewriting, penmanship, drawing, and athletics.

It is not sufficient to teach only the elementary principles of bookkeeping and stenography, as is done in some schools. If you teach these subjects at all, you should teach them so thoroughly that the pupil can go into an office and use the knowledge acquired. Unless your pupils can do this after they have completed these subjects, your commercial course will not meet with the approval of business men, nor will it hold pupils in school. Not only should these subjects be taught just as thoroughly as other subjects are taught, but the requirements for promotion from one class to another should be just as rigid as in any other department of the school. The pupil should not be allowed to think for a moment that the commercial course is easy. Because it appeals to him, it may be easier for him than some other course, but in the amount and kind of work, the requirements should be just as exacting as in any other department.

Up to the present time some of the text-books for commercial classes have not been as good as the text-books used in other courses, but our publishers are attempting to meet this demand, and the probability is that within a few years we shall be able to get just as good text-books for commercial departments as we

now have for the other high-school courses. There should be some provision for office practice in the class-room, so that the pupil may have an opportunity to study bookkeeping and the use of business forms by what we may call the laboratory method—learning how to use a note by actually using one, learning how to keep a bank account by actually depositing his imitation currency, drawing checks and paying bills by the use of checks. I do not mean to say that by the use of any devices of this sort you can turn a green boy into a ripe business man, but he can learn how to use some of the machinery of business and can do it as an incident to the study of bookkeeping. By this means the subject is made more interesting to him, and I believe that he will master what you are trying to teach in much less time. Business-men say that public-school boys are not accurate. Your business department offers no better test of accuracy than the work which is done through the medium of these offices, and when a boy has spent one or two hours, or even longer, hunting some mistake which he has made in this office practice, he has learned a lesson with reference to the value of accuracy which he will not soon forget.

I have been asked what should be the preparation for such a course of study. In the first place, there should be a mastery of the principal grammar-school subjects. Business-men say that the boys who seek employment in their stores and offices have not thoroughly mastered the “three R’s.” Probably in some cases the critics have not given sufficient thought to the conditions in the schools and have expected too much from them, but surely absolute accuracy in the use of figures is of first importance to any boy who contemplates entering a business office. In our high school, pupils do not definitely elect any particular course until after they have spent one year in the school; I am not sure that this would be the best plan for all schools, but I do feel that it has worked well in our school. One of our grammar-school principals said a few years ago that he had thirty boys who were coming into the high school in the fall, and that if they were allowed to make their choices of courses at that time, all but four of them would take the commercial course. This proportion

might not be found in every class, yet I feel pretty sure that if pupils were allowed to elect at the time of entering the high school, a much larger number would take the commercial course. This would give my department an air of greater popularity than it possesses at the present time, but I am certain that many boys would make a mistake if they were allowed to make their elections at that time. They come into the high school, and under the influence of the new conditions and the different school atmosphere, their plans and purposes change, and at the end of the first year they know better what line of work they should take. It is for this reason that no pupil who enters our school is allowed to elect any definite course of study until the end of his freshman year. I believe that an arrangement of this sort leaves less opportunity for objection to election in secondary schools.

"But," someone says, "why have a commercial department at all? What is its definite purpose? What will it do that other courses are not now doing?" And to answer these questions is the main purpose of this paper. Briefly, I believe that a good commercial department will do the following things which other courses are not now doing:

First: It will attract many pupils to the high school who would never be attracted by the other courses.

Second: It will keep many pupils in school who would not otherwise remain.

Third: While you are keeping these pupils in school by the use of these technical business subjects, you also have the opportunity to give them those other subjects necessary to make a well rounded course, and thus you are able to provide more pupils with a good education.

Fourth: While you are training these boys and girls for lives of usefulness, you are also fitting them to be better men and women.

I know that some of our most prominent educators believe that pupils in secondary schools are not mature enough to make wise choices of courses or subjects, and that a course of study which prepares for college is with a few modifications the best

course for all high-school pupils. This may all be true, but the principle of election has obtained in our schools from the start, and we must accept it whether we believe it or not. The old form of election is well illustrated by the following story: Mr. James Russell Lowell met an acquaintance who said: "I've discovered a way to make my fortune. We all know that the reason for the fine flavor of the wild duck is the wild celery on which it feeds. Now I propose to feed it to the domestic duck, and supply the market." Some weeks later, on meeting his acquaintance again, Mr. Lowell found him quite depressed and asked: "Why are you looking so unhappy? I thought the last time I saw you that you were on the point of making your fortune with ducks; wouldn't it work?" "No," was the reply, "they wouldn't eat it." And so in the past some of our pupils have refused the intellectual diet which we offered, and those who did not *choose* the prescribed course *elected* to leave school.

But no educational institution can carry out its purpose, unless it both attracts and holds pupils. The mission of the high school is not simply to provide an education for, *but to educate*, the boys and girls in the community to which the school belongs, and yet we all know that only a small percentage of those who complete our grammar-school courses ever graduate from our high schools. What becomes of the others? We are told that they leave school because of incapacity, or lack of interest, or that they have to go to work; but we should not accept these explanations too literally. The grammar-school teachers have testified to their capacity by promoting them to the high school, and surely they have shown some interest in education by the completion of the work of the grammar school. Of course they go to work when they leave school, there is nothing else for them to do, but there is a radical defect somewhere when so many are allowed to fall by the wayside.<sup>1</sup>

The boy who is not going to college realizes that when he leaves the high school he must go to work, and he and his parents believe that; if his work in school is to be worth while,

<sup>1</sup>See table showing high-school efficiency, in SCHOOL REVIEW, September, 1902, p. 564.



it should in some measure fit him to be a wage-earner. Large numbers of pupils of this class cannot be persuaded to complete a high-school course, unless they can see that the training offered will increase their earning power. The popularity of our business courses is good evidence that the short course of the business college does not afford as complete an education as our young people desire, and that they are willing to spend three or four years and pursue the other required subjects, provided they are given the opportunity to study these technical branches.

Our new high-school building was completed four years ago and was designed to accommodate the school for ten years, but it is already full and our building commission in reply to criticisms say that the new business department is responsible for the unexpected crowding. There may be some truth in the statement, at all events I am willing to bear all the blame that may attach to the department for keeping pupils in school. Boys and girls belong in school, and if one course of study will not keep them, another should be substituted. Surely it is better for a boy to spend three or four years in a good high school, no matter what he studies, than to spend six or eight months in the best private school, or possibly leave school altogether? Fortunately the rights of these pupils are now being recognized. In his report to the National Educational Association on "The Educational Progress of the Year," President Harper said :

The high-school curriculum cannot longer be regarded as one to be adjusted as a preparation for college. It may be questioned whether preparation for college is the most important subdivision of high-school work.

I repeat that the first purpose of a good business department is educational, and in the accomplishment of this purpose it will not only hold pupils who are in school, but it will attract many who are out of school who should be in, and will in this way extend the influence of the school. But is it true that these technical branches are altogether lacking in educational value? Our colleges, after having for years most strenuously opposed everything that even suggested a special training for business life, have

had a change of heart, but they still see through a glass darkly; for, while many of them have already established colleges of commerce, in which are taught business forms and accounts, commercial law, commercial geography, and other technical business subjects, they are still unwilling to admit that there is any room for these branches in our high schools.

A professor in one of our great universities, in a recent magazine article <sup>1</sup> on "Higher Commercial Education," said :

It slowly dawned on the academic consciousness that the classics alone, even when added to philosophy and mathematics, were not a complete nor the only means of education. . . . It was practically a question of applying the same good teaching to the new as to the old to obtain much the same admirable results. Hence, if the old and the new learning stood on an equal basis as regards cultural and disciplinary efficiency, it might with reason and justice be claimed that the new learning had in addition the great and preponderant advantage for the student of preparing him directly for the real problems in the practical life which he must live after leaving the university.

If the commercial branches possess disciplinary value for the college student, why should they be styled informational subjects when they are offered to the high-school pupil? Our high-schools are successfully teaching the elements of mathematics, science, and the languages, and surely they may be trusted to teach the business branches equally well.

I believe the time is not far distant when it will be generally admitted that the so-called commercial subjects are not lacking in educational value. President Harper in the report referred to said : "It is to be conceded that any ordinary subject, well studied, may be used advantageously for the purposes of general education." That is a valuable admission, and we will put it beside the opinion of a business-man who might be supposed to have a bias in favor of the more practical subjects, but he said : "It does not make much difference what a boy studies, provided he studies hard." I think that when the high school has finally declared its independence of the college, the first rule of the new high school will be : That subject or that course of study is best for a boy which arouses the best there is in

<sup>1</sup> See *Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1902, p. 677.

him. We shall come to admit that any subject which leads a boy voluntarily to study hard possesses for him decided educational value, and that a boy will acquire little mental discipline out of a subject which does not arouse his interest and to the work of which he must be driven. The discipline will be there, but it will not be mental. But, after all, much of the criticism of business courses loses force when we remember that the technical subjects represent only about one-fourth of the total of required work, and that the rest of the work is made up from the usual high-school branches which possess a recognized cultural and disciplinary value. Probably no American has done more to make commercial education respected and respectable than President James of Northwestern University, and in an address in Philadelphia, he said: "There are boys in our community to whom none of the existing courses appeal, whom this course would be a means of awakening, arousing, training, educating."

The second purpose of a business department is to give young men and women such a training as will make them useful in the business world and assist them in finding congenial and profitable employment. It is the custom of banks and business houses to recruit their office forces from our grammar and high schools, and, whatever may be our theories, this practice is likely to continue for sometime to come, and that for two reasons: first, the college graduate is unwilling to go to work at what he considers to be a boy's wages and boy's work; second, the opinion is commonly held by business-men, whether rightly or wrongly I do not attempt to say, that the young fellow who is just out of college is unfitted to enter upon the drudgery and to attend to the details of the minor position which he must occupy until he has shown his fitness for something better.

Do business-men recognize the value of this technical training? Yes! Formerly our bankers and business-men took their raw recruits from the grammar schools and were satisfied, if they had mastered the "three R's," but we find a mark of progress in the fact that many of our best business-men, while

still insisting upon the mastery of the "three R's," demand that this be supplemented by a good high-school training, and there is an increasing demand for boys who have also acquired some practical knowledge of business affairs. In my school we do not graduate enough boys from our business course to supply the demand from business-men, and many of those who have employed one of our graduates have come to us for a second and a third.

The New York Teachers' Association recently sent a set of questions to business and professional men in New York city about the public-school boys whom they had employed. To these questions four hundred and nine answers were received. In commenting on these replies the *World's Work* said:<sup>1</sup>

There is a significant preponderance of opinion in favor of teaching all boys the elements of bookkeeping. Nearly all the answers lay great stress on the advantage of learning at an early age how to keep accounts neatly and accurately; and a majority think that boys should be taught in school something about actual business transactions. There is even a strong preponderance of opinion that the public-school course should aim directly at preparing pupils to earn a livelihood. But it is not meant that they should become merely commercial schools or "clerk factories," only that the studies should be utilitarian as well as "cultural." The judgment evidently is that the two kinds of studies need not be wholly divorced, and that by right teaching both results can be gained from the same studies.

There is a decided opinion that some commercial training should be given as a preparation for the professions; and that boys who propose to enter commercial careers should begin commercial studies at fourteen years of age. As regards foreign languages, emphasis is laid on the desirability, first of knowing German, then Spanish; French comes third. The longer a boy has school training the better his chance of employment. There is a strong preference for high-school graduates.

But why should the value of a subject be seriously questioned because it has a vocational purpose? What is the purpose of an education? President Roosevelt is reported to have said: "If an educational institution means anything, it means fitting a man for better service than he could do without it." If educating a pupil means fitting him for better service, why is it not as legitimate to fit a girl to be a good stenographer as to be

<sup>1</sup>See *World's Work*, November, 1902, p. 2711.

a good teacher? There is surely a great need for good stenographers whose knowledge of shorthand is supplemented by a good general education. Is it not well that every young man and woman should be equipped with the training necessary to enable them to earn a livelihood? Is not that community to be congratulated which has a large percentage of independent, self-supporting citizens?

How many and what positions are open to the graduates of our high schools who have no special training? The girls may find employment in stores or factories with long hours and hard work at \$0.75 to \$1.25 a day, or they may do housework. If the high school takes the daughter of a common laborer and while educating her gives her a training that will enable her to earn from \$8 to \$15 a week with steady and much less arduous employment, has it not done a good thing for the girl as well as for the community? It costs no more to instruct her in stenography and typewriting than to teach her Latin or Greek. As a stenographer, she will be in a position where her mental powers should continue to develop, while, if she goes to work in a store or a factory, she will soon forget her Latin or Greek, and what mental discipline she has gained will be lost under the stress of her daily routine of hard labor.

The boy who has just graduated from a high school knows that when he applies to a business-man for a position, he will be asked: "What can you do?" If he has a knowledge of stenography and typewriting, or of bookkeeping, and the ability to add a column of figures rapidly and accurately, and can write a good business hand, he is prepared to do something which will give him a foothold toward his business career, and then, if his additional general training is of any value, he will be able to earn promotion more rapidly than his more poorly equipped fellow. Of course, these positions are clerical, but you do not expect a boy of eighteen, without capital, to start in at the head of a business. It is only by showing that he can fill the minor position well that he earns his promotion to a better one. If I may again quote President James:

Such schools take a boy at fifteen years of age and keep him . . . until

he has acquired such habits of steady work and application, promptness, neatness, and thoughtfulness as will make an invaluable assistant in any business office.

I have tried to show you that a good business course will keep boys in school, that it will impart to them a measure of mental discipline and power, and that the training which it gives will aid them in earning a living ; but these things alone do not measure its value. In every community there is a large class of boys to whom school life does not appeal ; many of them come from the homes of workingmen and realize that they must prepare to care for themselves, and it is to this class of boys that the practical features of a business course especially appeal. The principal of a large school said to me a few days ago :

My building is full, and it is proposed to take my business department out and put it into another building. If this is done, I shall lose the most interesting of my school problems. Many of the boys who are attracted by this course come to us without a liking for study, irresponsible, wilful, rebellious, lacking in courtesy, and without any definite purpose in life, and we are trying to make men of them. We do not always succeed, but the successes have been much more numerous than the failures, and the results have been very gratifying.

I think that we shall some day reach a new point of view, where we shall be able to see with a clearer vision, and then we shall all recognize that any subject, bookkeeping for instance, which tempts a rough, unreliable, unambitious boy, known as Bill Jones, to remain in school after he has vowed that he will never go another day ; which so holds his interest that he forgets to play truant and hates to lose a single recitation ; which so changes his attitude toward school life that he is persuaded to try other studies, and even to continue in school for three or four years, with the result that he is so changed that when he goes out from school with his diploma in his hand he has acquired habits of punctuality, industry, trustworthiness, and courtesy, and has the determination to make the best possible use of his talents and opportunities ; which in a word has changed Bill Jones into William Jones, has justified its right to a place in the curriculum of any high school.

The editor of the *Journal of Education* said some time ago :

"Business education has come to stay. What are you going to do about it?" That question is still the most important one relating to commercial education. If the commercial department of your school is to fulfil its purpose, it must be on a par with the other departments; and if that is not its present position, it is your first duty to place it there. What would be thought of a father who would say to one of his sons: "You are neither handsome, nor bright, nor attractive, nor strong, nor useful; you must stay at home and keep out of sight, while your more favored brother is allowed every privilege." Surely he would be an unnatural parent, and yet that is the way many business departments are treated. Many such departments are not respected because they are not made respectable by comparison with the other departments in the same school. Give your business department just as suitable a home and just as good an equipment of teachers and supplies as you give any other department in your school, and you will immediately begin to say nice things about it, and other teachers will do the same, and the department will very soon become a respected member of the school.

As this old prejudice against business branches disappears, we shall come to see that such subjects as bookkeeping, stenography, and commercial law, should not be restricted to the pupils who are pursuing the business course, but that they are entitled to a place in any course of study because of their general utility. A study of commercial law will not enable every man to be his own lawyer, but it will give him a knowledge of the principles of law involved in ordinary business affairs, and will help him to know when he ought to consult a lawyer. Professional men will find a knowledge of stenography not the least of the labor-saving devices of modern times, and the boy who is preparing for a profession should be encouraged to make this a part of his preparation. Every man who has the handling of even small sums of money will find a knowledge of bookkeeping of real value. Business-men will find that a knowledge of accounts will enable them to know when their books are being properly kept. If every housekeeper had a sufficient knowledge of accounts to keep an

accurate record of expenditures, it would enable her to answer the question, "Where does all the money go to?" and if necessary this record would form a basis for systematic economy. At any time a woman may have business cares thrust upon her, and she will then find a knowledge of business matters of positive value.

In conclusion, I have tried to help you to see that the most important function of a business department is educational; that the technical business branches should be taught just as thoroughly and conscientiously as other high-school branches; that when they are so taught they do possess educational value; that only when these subjects are well taught will the knowledge acquired possess any real earning value; and that the great object of commercial teachers, as of all other teachers, should be to help boys and girls to be independent and self-supporting men and women, and useful and desirable members of society.

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